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CENTRAL INTELLIGENCE AGENCY

OFFICE OF NATIONAL ESTIMATES

2 June 1964

MEMORANDUM FOR THE DIRECTOR

SUBJECT: The Laos Problem

I. PRESENT SITUATION IN LAOS

A. Domestic

1. Military. The PL/VM appear to have stopped for the moment, with enemy-held territory roughly what it was at the time of the 1962 Geneva Conference, their previous point of maximum advance.* The initiative nevertheless remains with the PL/VM, and they have the capability of taking all Laos in short order at any time they so decide. Recent T-28 bombings may have hampered their advance and given some lift to Neutralist/FAR morale, but it is probably only fear of provoking major US intervention that prevents

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At this time, Kong Le's forces, which were cooperating with the PL against the FAR, held the PDJ, Xieng Khouang and the Na Koy/Nhommarath plateau, all of which have since been seized by the PL.

S-E-C-R-E-T

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S-E-C-R-E-T

the Communist forces from moving to the Mekong. The T-28 bombings as a portent of possible further US escalation may be a factor in feeding this fear.

2. Political. The Rightist coup of 19 April and the Cabinet reshuffle have enabled Communists to claim that the Geneva Accords have been upset, that Souvanna is a prisoner of the Right, and that he and Kong Le are no longer "true" neutralists. Unless great new pressures are put upon the PL, they are not likely to settle for less than a full return to the pre-19 April political situation. At the same time the Rightist extremists who control Vientiane will probably overthrow Souvanna if he tries to move any significant distance in that direction. Indeed, they may stage a coup at any time for less clear reasons, and a critical assassination (e.g., Souvanna Phouma) is always possible. Souvanna himself may get fed up and leave Laos.

B. International: Conferences and Consultations

3. At least five plans for international discussions to ease the situation have been put forward in recent days: (a) The US, with UK and some other support, is supporting consultations between representatives of the Geneva powers in Vientiane under

- 2 -

S-E-C-R-E-T

S-E-C-R-E-T

restrictive terms of reference: i.e., Article IV of the 1962 Laos Accords. (These discussions are under way, but only a minority of the 14 powers are attending.*) (b) France and the USSR have requested a reconvening of the 14 in Geneva. (c) Peiping and Hanoi are calling for a new conference of the 14 Geneva powers at Phnom Penh to consider first Laos, then Cambodia. (d) India has proposed that special ambassadors of the 14 meet for consultations in Vientiane. (e) The Poles, presumably with Moscow backing, are calling for a conference in Switzerland of the Co-chairman (UK and USSR), the ICC members (Poland, Canada, and India), and the three Laos factions.

II. THE ROLES OF OTHER POWERS

A. Communist China and North Vietnam

4. The DRV trains, supplies, and encadres the Pathet Lao (PL) who would otherwise not be much of a threat, and it provides several battalions of troops for use in Laos. Communist China may have a few troops in the two Northwest provinces and has trained .. and supplied puppet "neutralist" forces there. In any partition

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All of the Communist powers, Cambodia, and probably France and India.

- 3 -

S-E-C-R-E-T

of Laos, the PL would insist on retaining practically all they now hold. China would continue to dominate in the Northwest, with the remaining PL territory under DRV influence. Both Peiping and Hanoi are anxious to avoid war with the US and hope to get a Communist Laos, bit-by-bit, using relatively uncostly and low-risk tactics of fight-talk, fight-talk, going to the conference table whenever the situation threatens to explode. They already hold the parts of Laos that are most important to them, i.e., the parts bordering China and Vietnam (including the Ho Chi Minh tract) and the Plaine des Jarres (PDJ).

B. The USSR and Poland

5. The USSR appears to have toyed with the idea of abandoning the coalition government and the Accords on the grounds that the coup had destroyed them. More recently it appears to have reversed its field and is now giving tentative support to the Accords and to Souvanna Phouma in the hope of reversing his pro-Rightist trend. If a major military crisis developed over Laos, however, the USSR would probably be very stiff in condemning the US and the non-Communist Lao and would probably give some material as well as political support to the DRV. It is probable that Moscow would be content to see an effective neutralist buffer in Laos which would

retard Peiping's southward advance and keep tensions in the area from reaching the flash point. At the same time Moscow is anxious not to lay itself open to Chinese accusations of selling out Communist revolution in Southeast Asia. Moscow's backing of the Polish conference proposal, which omits both the Chinese and the US, may indicate a Soviet maneuver for a role as the savior of world peace from the reckless and aggressive Chinese and Americans. In general, however, the Soviets appreciate that they have not much leverage in the area and have seemed anxious to minimize their involvement there.

C. The French

6. De Gaulle favors compromising with the Communists in the area and has tried to divide the Laos Neutralists from the Rightists. The French appear to believe that another Geneva Conference would stop the fighting and preserve at least a facade of neutralism in the area for a time, giving them an opportunity to try to reassert their influence in Southeast Asia. They are trying to get Souvanna to drop preconditions and go to a 14-nation Geneva conference on the basis of the status quo, i.e., without demanding that the PL surrender their recent gains.

D. The Indians

7. Even though the Indians have the deciding vote between the Poles and Canadians in the ICC, they have until recently played a passive role; recently they have been a little firmer against Polish obstructionist tactics, but they are inclined to accept the idea that Souvanna is a captive of the Rightists. Recently they have proposed that a conference could make progress on the basis of a PL concession which would give up their recent military gains and a Rightist concession that would restore the pre-coup political situation. There is no indication yet whether the accession of Shastri will affect Indian policy in Laos.

E. Thailand

8. The Thai remain firmly anti-Communist. They believe that current developments are the inevitable result of having compromised with the Communists at Geneva in the first place, and they feel that the US should take much stronger action in the area. They are not wholly convinced of the firmness of US determination, however, and are strongly opposed to any actions which would place them any farther out on a limb without a firm US commitment. They are prepared to let the US use their soil for a strong and meaningful action against the Communists, although not for gestures which expose them, but from which the US does not intend to follow through.

F. The UK and Canada

9. Over the years London and Ottawa have had doubts about US tactics in Laos, but recently their view of the situation appears to have come increasingly in line with Washington's and their support of US policy has increased accordingly.

III. POSSIBLE EFFECTS ON THE LAOS PROBLEM OF VARIOUS US COURSES OF ACTION

A. The Consultation/Conference Route

10. The current consultations in Vientiane under Article IV of the 1962 Accords, being boycotted by most of the Accord participants, can have little impact on the situation. At most they will have propaganda value, showing that the US was willing to meet and try to preserve the peace under terms of the Accords whereas the Communists sabotaged the effort.

11. The consultations suggested by the Poles might, assuming that Hanoi is ready for a pause of some duration, result in restoring some form of coalition government. But, in such consultations the PL would be unlikely to agree to withdraw from the areas they have seized in recent months. Indeed, the consultations might tend to confirm these PL gains as part of a compromise to straighten out the political situation and win PL promises of future good behavior. If, in the course of such

consultations, the US moved troops to Thailand, it would be generally regarded as a US attempt to influence a conference in which it was not participating. We cannot tell whether the effort would be self-defeating.

B. Deployment of US Troops to Thailand

12. The Thai would oppose this deployment if it were designed only as a gesture and not part of a plan to move substantial US strength into Laos at a later time. Assuming Thai approval, the move would still have doubtful impact. The PL/DRV feel that they are in a stronger position than they were in 1962 and are less likely to be awed by such a move. Nevertheless they would probably refrain from further advances while US troops were nearby, in the expectation of nibbling their way to victory later.

C. Significantly Stepped-up Air Attacks on Supply Lines and Bases in Laos

13. If effective bombing attacks were made on roads, bridges, supply dumps, etc., the physical damage done would hamper Communist advances in Laos but would not of itself prevent them, and it almost certainly would not enable the inept FAR and remnant Neutralists to retake substantial areas from the PL/VM. However, as a symbol of US readiness to change the ground rules and escalate further if needed to stop Communist advances, it might have considerable

S-E-C-R-E-T

political impact on Hanoi and Peiping. It is possible that the Communists would be prepared to make at least limited concessions to reduce the level of military action and risk and to gain a respite at the conference table.

14. We do not believe that the Chinese Communists would be prepared to throw their obsolescent air force into the fray, but they and the DRV would increase anti-aircraft defense in the area as rapidly as possible.

15. The Communists would raise a great propaganda hullabaloo. They would attempt to turn aside claims that the US action was taken at the request of the Lao government, by attacking the legitimacy of Souvanna's government and by claiming that the Geneva Accords and the coalition government had been destroyed by Rightist actions.

D. Garrisoning the Mekong Towns with US Troops

16. The Communists would be unlikely to seek a head-on clash with US forces which did not move out significantly from the Mekong. Considerable harassing of outposts and supply lines would occur, however, as well as some Viet Cong style terrorism. The Chinese Communists would probably deploy additional forces to Southern China but they probably would not move overtly into Laos. Inevitably there would be a violent propaganda and political campaign

S-E-C-R-E-T

attacking the US "invasion" and attempting to get international condemnation of the action. Beyond this, we believe that the Communists would probably lie low in Laos, waiting for the eventual withdrawal of US forces (whether from US domestic or international pressures) and hoping to capitalize on increased "anti-imperialist" feeling in Laos.

E. Continuation of Present Levels of US Action re Laos

17. The PL/VM have taken little offensive action in the past few days and may be preparing to settle down for the rainy season, concentrating on consolidating their recent gains and reducing Meo pockets along their lines of communication. With virtually full control of the strategic Plaines des Jarres and poised in at least three locations within quick striking range of the Mekong, they would be left in an excellent position for new advances later. In the meantime they could concentrate on the political struggle, trying for international acceptance of their gains to date and for increased international pressure against US interests in the area. They are also likely to step up their promotion of the PL-controlled dissident Neutralists as the "true" Neutralists, and they may establish a separate coalition government with them.

18. The possibility cannot be ruled out, however, that they may feel that we are giving up on Laos and that they should finish their seizure of the country now, capitalizing on the total disarray

of the Neutralist and Rightist forces and the confusion of the non-Communist world regarding Laos.

19. In either case there remains the danger of another rightist coup and a complete breakdown of organization among the non-Communist Lao, leaving the US with no legitimate regime to defend.

20. At best, a continuation of present levels of US action re Laos might win a pause in the Communist advance and a respite of a few months without increased investment and risk. However, anti-Communist elements in Southeast Asia are at the moment nervous and unconfident. In this state of affairs, further evidence of US uncertainty could bring about increased erosion of confidence in South Vietnam, Thailand, and the GRC concerning US will and determination to prevent a piecemeal Communist takeover of Southeast Asia.

FOR THE BOARD OF NATIONAL ESTIMATES:



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Chairman

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- 11 -

S-E-C-R-E-T